

Men too clever for their own good

Understanding the CIA's foreign policy role

THE MAN WHO KEPT THE SECRETS: RICHARD HELMS AND THE CIA.

By Thomas Powers. Alfred A.
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By Ward Just

Of course there have been interludes of public violence, Korea and Vietnam to name the most conspicuous, but in the main the cold war has been fought underground, the two principal antagonists the Committee for State Security (KGB) and the Central Intelligence Agency. The KGB, organized in the shadows of the world's blackest oligarchy — in the shadows as it were — had the infinite advantage of the Soviet state itself, paranoid, obsessive, surreptitious and possessing "assets" beyond the dreams of avarice.

CIA was another matter, operating in the sunshine of a benign democratic nation, though in the complacent 1950s it was easy enough to keep the lid on, journalists and others being anxious not to compromise this singular American weapon in the cold war. It would be in no way patriotic to cause inconvenience to American skymasters in the face of what was, no one could deny it, a threat. No one questioned the Soviet threat, nor the ubiquity or ruthlessness of the KGB, so when the CIA wound up the apparatus one official (Frank Wisner) called "my mighty Wurlitzer" everybody danced, understanding there were two sets of rules or, rather, a single set. The assumption was that the KGB did not abide by any rules.

However, there was a price. It was absolutely necessary to convince the public, and not merely the credulous voter but members of Congress and the national press as well, that the CIA bore no resemblance to its opposite number. It differed from the KGB as the checked and balanced American government differed from the Politburo. The CIA played by more or less democratic rules, and here

there was a public wink — a recognition that The Firm was not the Boy Scouts and occasionally there was disagreeable business to be done — but this would be done with subtlety and restraint and would be within the vague grounds defined by a decent, liberal society through successive decent, liberal administrations.

In other words, there would be no acts of criminal violence against foreign politicians and any suborning that might be done would be done with discretion and a minimum of inelegance and it went without saying that the CIA did not play on domestic turf. There was no question that at the top levels the agency employed men of exceptional character and intelligence, honorable men who sought to carry out the directives of the President of the United States. Its operations would be kept secret, not just from the New York Times but from "inception to eternity."

This is roughly what Thomas Powers calls "the child's history of the world" and it came apart with astonishing speed in the early 1970s — collapsed, really, with the suddenness of a teenager falling out of love. And of course this child's history of the world is not wholly false, merely incomplete, and that we can understand it at all, and understand the CIA's role in American foreign policy since World War II, is due to this remarkable book.

At the center, and by no means an unsympathetic figure, is the enigmatic Richard Helms, a superior bureaucrat and spy-master who by the evidence of this book lived too intimately with too many secrets and who in the end suffered excruciating conflicts of loyalties. Powers carefully conducts the reader through the history, the OSS with its heavy dependence on the British secret service, the early amateurishness of the gentlemen spies recruited by Allen W. Dulles, the triumph of the U-2, the successful coups in Iran and Guatemala, and finally the last, confused 15 years — the Bay of Pigs, the clumsy assassination schemes against Castro and Lumumba, the Phoenix program in Vietnam, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the demoralized agency of today.

Powers is superb on the early covert

operators, the founding fathers who set the style — men who were "gregarious, intrigued by possibilities, liked to do things, had three bright ideas a day, shared the optimism of stock market plungers, and were convinced that every problem had its handle and that the CIA could find a way to reach it. They tended to be white Anglo-Saxon patricians from old families with old money, at least in the beginning, and they somehow inherited traditional British attitudes toward the colored races of the world — not the pukka sahib arrogance of the Indian Raj, but the mixed fascination and condescension of men like T. E. Lawrence, who were enthusiastic partisans of the alien cultures into which they dipped for a time and rarely doubted their ability to help, until it was too late."

No one who has watched the CIA in Indochina can doubt the truth of that statement, though I think Powers stretches it when he adds that the agency must be remembered "with a mixture of regret" as well as bitterness by the out-of-the-way peoples "it encouraged out onto shaky limbs, and then abandoned." It's quite a list. Beyond the Cubans in Miami and the Montagnards and Meos in Vietnam and Laos there were the Khambas in Tibet, the Sumatran colonels in Indonesia, the Nationalist Chinese in Burma, the Ukrainians in Russia, and the Kurds in Iraq, "who exercised a special fascination for Allen Dulles."

This book is too thorough, serious and intelligent to summarize in a review. Each reader will have a favorite part. Mine is the account of the assassination plots against Fidel Castro, whose exposure gave rise to the notion that the CIA was a rogue elephant on a helter-skelter rampage. Powers sets the scene wonderfully, the Senate Committee dimwittedly attempting to find the end of the string — who ordered the rub-out? Kennedy people like McNamara, Maxwell Taylor, Richard Goodwin, Sorensen and Bundy "had been strangely quiet while CIA officials had been like amnesia victims for the source of orders to kill Castro." The Senate Intelligence Commit-

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tee, headed by the egregious Frank
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plot could not be pinned down. But — "Could anyone believe that the Kennedy people would all have been chewing on pencils and murmuring disbelief if the CIA had been truly off on its own where Castro was concerned. They would have raised the roof. Could anyone believe that the CIA as an institution much cared who ruled Cuba? Could anyone doubt the response of the Kennedy people, and very likely the Senate Intelligence Committee itself, if some CIA official had risked the complete absence of a single piece of paper to back him up and said: "Well, who do you think ordered Castro's assassination, the office boy? *It was John F. Kennedy and his brother Bobby.*"

In Power's opinion (and now mine, so strong is his argument) Helms could have said exactly that, but didn't. He was the man who kept the secrets; who was sworn to keep them (it went with the job), so he said nothing. Powers's account of the cupidity, hypocrisy and posturing of the Church committee — Washington at its smarriest — is brilliant. The committee was pretending not to know the way the world worked. "Their questions seemed (to Helms) aimed purely at the public record. The committee members kept asking how the CIA could undertake such

monstrous acts without explicit authorization. Where is the piece of paper which says, Do it? More than once Helms found himself with an almost irresistible urge to fire back: Senator, how can you be so god-damned dumb? You don't order a thing like that in *writing*."

There is much, much more in this book — a story not of a rogue elephant out of control, but of men who were often too clever for their own good, and whose obsession with the Soviets and their clients blinded them to other, equally ominous forces. Misused by successive administrations, the men at the top of the agency too often cooperated in their own misuse, arguing — as Helms did — that he only worked for one President at a time. The trouble with that statement is that it's absolutely true and therein lies the exquisite paradox: to refuse an assignment of a President is, in this context, the very definition of a rogue elephant. Powers points no way out of this dilemma for the very sound reason that there isn't any, except of course, resignation, simply resign the job rather than trot off to kill Castro or supply Howard Hunt with a wig. This course seems not to have occurred to the top people, these honorable men, who gave such loyalty to their institution.